

A Magnificent Obsession

How One Volunteer Unraveled the Story of Vermont's Rich Industrial Heritage

In 1978, Massachusetts resident Victor R. Rolando told me he'd like to inventory the archeological remains of Vermont's iron industry—as a volunteer. With great enthusiasm, I said, “Great, do it!” I didn't think there was very much to inventory, so I presumed it wouldn't take him very long. Also, I figured that living outside of Vermont would dampen his ardor for the task.

Twelve years, a graduate degree in History, and thousands of miles later, Vic Rolando had inventoried 99 ironwork sites. By then, the research had expanded way beyond the iron industry. One can't make iron without charcoal and without burning lime. So Vic proceeded to document 71 charcoal-making sites and 73 lime kiln sites. Each year, he provided the State of Vermont with a completed site survey form, topographic map location, detailed sketch map, and “additional information” for each site. At the end of every year, he prepared a detailed summary of the past year's activities and proposed tasks for the coming year. During each year, he gave at least four to eight talks to local historical societies, Rotary Clubs, libraries, and professional organizations. Instead of just recording sites and leaving it at that, Vic exhaustively researched the broad historic context of each industry in and outside of Vermont and the history of the people and families who made those industries and sites happen.

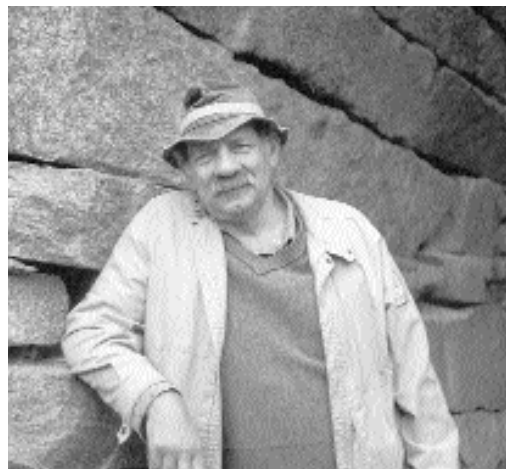
While his story focused on Vermont, Vic illuminated and described the regional and national picture of these different industries. The Vermont Division for Historic Preservation conservatively estimates the dollar value of Vic's donated services at over \$100,000 since 1979; the historic value is beyond measure.

By 1989, Vic began assembling all this information into a book. The title kept changing and the contents kept expanding but by 1991, the manuscript was ready for publication. If nobody else wanted to publish it, he would publish it himself. And he did.

*200 Years of Soot and Sweat: The History and Archaeology of Vermont's Iron, Charcoal, and Lime Industries*¹ was published in 1992. A few of us celebrated the fruit of so much driving, walking, and plain old hard work and research. You can't ever say “thank you” for a monumental, amazing, volunteer labor of love such as this one. I tried to in the “Foreword” of the book and failed. By personally giving a copy of the book to the Governor, I attempted to show Vic how important his effort was to the history of our state—and that, again, was only a small token. But recently, Rolla Queen's review of *200 Years of Soot and Sweat in Historical Archaeology* concludes with “the author should be applauded for the masterful way he has approached the study of these sites. This is the sort of publication toward which all archeologists working with survey and inventory reports should strive, and of which any of us would be proud.”² And some say volunteers aren't worth our time.

—Giovanna Peebles

Vidor R Rolando at the New Hampshire Iron Company blast furnace site in Franconia, New Hampshire. Rolando served as the project leader for the Society for Industrial Archeology Northern New England Chapter's all-volunteer, three day recording session at this industrial site during November 1994.



Notes

- 1 Information about ordering *200 Years of Soot and Sweat* can be obtained from: Victor Rolando, RR. 1, Box 1521-3, Manchester Ctr., VT 05255.
- 2 Queen, Rolla. Review of *200 Years of Soot and Sweat: The History and Archaeology of Vermont's Iron, Charcoal, and Lime Industries* by Victor R. Rolando. *Historical Archeology*, Vol. 28, No. 3, 1994, pp. 128-130.